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L'Express vs. Le Point—Paris Awaits a Highly Political Press War

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PARIS, Aug. 31—A magazine war is about to start in France. Ostensibly, it is a fight between publishers, but in fact it is an intricate round in the hidden struggle here between the existing power structure and its challengers.

The irony which flavors the whole affair also touches the starting position of the contenders. On one side is Jean-Jacques Servan-Schreiber (Gee-Gee, as he is widely called, by the French pronunciation of his first two initials).

Mr. Servan-Schreiber, founder and publisher of the successful news weekly *L'Express* and affiliated enterprises, appears as the defender in this round.

The challenger is represented by a group of his former top staffers, led by Simon Nora, previously chief aide to ex-Premier Jacques Chaban-Delmas and now, directing the vast publishing and distribution concern, Hachette.

They are preparing, for initial publication on Sept. 25, a newsweekly to be called *Le Point*. The aim, Mr. Nora said, is to "make a better *L'Express*."

That possibility no doubt exists. As *L'Express* was patterned after *Time* when it was launched in 1953, *Le Point* seems to be patterned after *Newsweek*. The main difference in conception is that instead of seeking maximum circulation (*L'Express* now has about 725,000, biggest in France), *Le Point* seeks a limited but quality circulation of 150,000 to start and 300,000 tops.

Mr. Nora said in an interview that he had decided to leave the government and enter journalism because he felt that was "a more effective way to try to get things changed in this country."

He denied any sense of hostility against Mr. Servan-Schreiber, though they have long had strained relations. He

argues that there is room for another newsweekly in France, and that *Le Point* is expected to reach the financial breakeven stage within two years.

Philippe Grumbach, editor of *L'Express*, says flatly that the purpose of *Le Point* is to "shut up Servan-Schreiber," who has made his name as a glibly critic of the Government and the powers that be.

Mr. Servan-Schreiber's initial success was, as a matter of fact, due to his opposition to the Algerian war. His magazine started as a leftist, anti-establishment voice. The end of the war, and a broadening audience, brought the evolution of *L'Express* into a more conventionally independent journal of mass circulation.

Mr. Servan-Schreiber decided to go into politics, and turned the magazine over to the staff. But last year he changed his mind, and sought to return. There was a fight, he regained editorial control, and a half-dozen of the top people left.

Meanwhile, Mr. Servan-Schreiber, who is a deputy from Nancy, decided to dramatize his challenge to the Government by running against Premier Chaban-Delmas in his constituency of Bordeaux. He lost, and he angered the Government.

Not long afterward, Mr. Nora left the Premier's office and turned up at Hachette six months later.

Hachette is an ancient concern that developed a monopoly of French press and periodical distribution. After the end of World War II, a bill was put through the assembly to prevent its regaining the monopoly. Instead, a distribution "cooperative" was formed among the newspapers.

But the papers that emerged after the occupation had no resources, so their cooperative was financed by credits from the Banque de Paris et Pays-Bas. The eventual result was that the bank now dominates, though with very little ownership, both all distribution and the great publishing empire that

Hachette has built in a generation.

The bank is private, but it has extremely close relations with the state. Hachette is private, but it is taken for granted that under no circumstances would it counter those who rule the state nor allow its publications to be seriously critical of the Government, whatever government holds power.

Thus in the cryptic shorthand of French politics, setting aside the infinite subtleties of operation, Hachette is considered a Government mechanism. The partisans of *L'Express* do not doubt that *Point*'s challenge to *L'Express* is the way the Government has chosen to silence Mr. Servan-Schreiber's challenge to its decisions.

Means of Pressure Seen

The dummy copy so far available shows only the layout of *Le Point* and gives no evidence of the direction it will take. Frenchmen who know the publishing world here say it is unlikely that *Point* can kill *L'Express* or overtake its solid lead, but that its existence will make possible the exertion of quiet pressure through advertisers.

A similar challenge to *L'Express* was mounted a few years ago with the *Nouveau Candidat*, but it collapsed. *Le Point* has, for France, an enormous promotion budget and apparently unlimited access to the resources of Hachette.

It is possible that the war will force a breach in the opaque shield between the public and the decision-makers in France. It is equally possible that it will be fought in the shadows of innuendo, emitting only occasional glints of battle.

Either way, it may come closer to reflecting the real political struggle in France than the formal election campaign, which is developing as a head-on encounter between the Gaullist right and the allied Communist-Socialist left.